

Spontaneously Disappearing Gallstones

Calvin H. Norman, Jr., MD and Daniel G. Butera, MD
Brooklyn, New York

A case of spontaneously disappearing gallstones, in a patient who had no evidence of a biliary fistula or gallbladder surgery, is presented.

There have been sporadic reports in the literature citing cases of demonstrated gallstones that have disappeared from the gallbladder, and sometimes the bile ducts, in patients who have not undergone surgery and have no evidence of a biliary fistula.¹ It is increasingly evident that this phenomenon must be considered in the management of patients with gallstones. A report on another such patient who over a period of many years gradually depleted her gallbladder of multiple gallstones is presented.

Case Report

TM, a 64-year-old married female, had a chief complaint of right upper quadrant pain for an eight-month period. The patient had two children, had gone through the menopause at age 52, and had no previous history of illness, except for hay fever. Her family history was negative. Her system review was negative. Her physical examination revealed an elderly female, 5', 1", 157.5 lb. She was in no distress. Her blood pressure was 130/70. Her physical examination was negative except for a cystocele, a rectocele, and presbycusis. Laboratory data were normal.

X-ray examinations were unremarkable except for multiple gallstones noted in the gallbladder (Figures 1 and 2). The patient decided against surgery and was followed as an outpatient with serial gallbladder examinations over a period of years during which time she was symptomatic. Gallstones were demonstrable with decreasing size and number following the initial examination (Figure 1), and subsequent examinations two years, five years, six years, and seven years later (Figure 2). On the last gallbladder series, nine years after the initial study, no gallstones were present (Figure 3).

Discussion

Reports of spontaneously disappearing gallstones, although infrequent,

have occurred often enough to lead one reporter to observe that the phenomenon may not be as rare as generally supposed.^{2,3} It has been generally accepted that the mechanism of the disappearance of the gallstones has been through metabolic dissolution,⁴ or through passage of the stones through the cystic and common duct into the bowel.^{4,5} The latter mechanism has received greatest support. It has also been postulated that the passage of the stones through the duct system into the bowel can be painless or accompanied by bouts of colic.⁶ It has been theorized that smaller stones are capable of being passed into the bowel from the gallbladder without pain.⁷ In all the cases cited there has been an absence of evidence of fistulous formation between the biliary system and the intestinal tract, thereby ruling out biliary fistula as a pathway of escape of the gallstones from the gallbladder.

Regardless of the mechanism of the disappearance of the stones, it is clear that the possibility exists, in a patient in whom gallstones are demonstrated, that over a variable period of time without surgery or other definitive treatment some of these patients may have their gallstones disappear spontaneously. There have been cases cited in the literature as a result of the embarrassing situation of finding an empty gallbladder at surgery despite the previous demonstration of gallstones in the gallbladder roentgenographically.⁸⁻¹⁰

The confirmation of the presence of gallstones by x-ray studies immediately prior to surgery would therefore appear to be prudent.

Literature Cited

1. Linsman JF, Corday E: Spontaneous disappearance of gallstones. *JAMA* 171(1):98-100, 1959
2. McFarlane JR, Glenn F: The disappearance of demonstrated gallstones. *Arch Surg* 88:1003, 1964
3. Ochsner SF, Giesen AF: Problem of disappearing gallstones: Another case of spontaneous disappearance on cholecystography. *Am J Roentgenol* 83:831-834, 1960
4. Johnson CG, Nakayama F: Solubility of cholesterol and gallstones in metabolic material. *Arch Surg* 75:436-441, 1957
5. Schaldach F, Wilson SD: Disappearing gallstones. *Am J Surg* 113:680-681, 1967
6. Acosta JM, Ledisma CL, Rossi R: Total spontaneous disappearance of gallstones by

migration. *Acta Gastroenterol Latinoam* 6:111-115, 1974

7. Acromano JP, Schwinger HM, DeAngelis J: The spontaneous disappearance of gallstones. *Am J Roentgenol* 99(3):637-641, 1967

8. Addleman WW: Can gallstones disappear spontaneously? *Gastroenterology* 37:656-659, 1962

9. Miller MC: Spontaneous disappearance of gallstones. *Gastroenterology* 31:588-591, 1956

10. Ochsner SF: Disappearing gallstones: Lesson in management of patients with gallstones. *Am J Surg* 99:336-338, 1960



Figure 1. Gallbladder with multiple large stones.

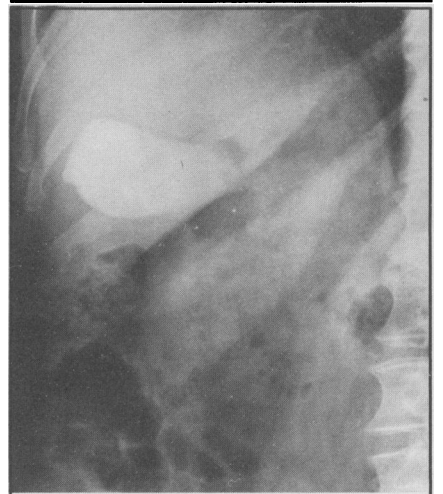


Figure 2. Gallbladder, two years later.

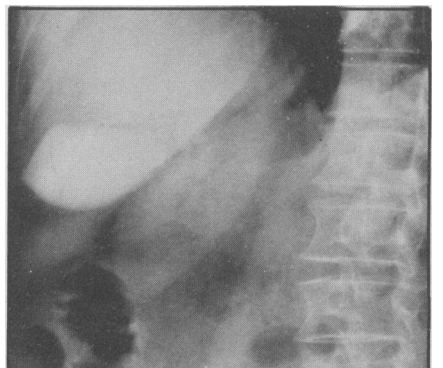


Figure 3. Gallbladder, nine years later. All stones have disappeared.

Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. Calvin H. Norman, Jr., St. Mary's Hospital, 1298 St. Mark's Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11213.